

WOMAN IN DILEMMA: A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE FEMALE

CHARACTERS OF CHITRA DIVAKARUNI'S

ARRANGED MARRIAGE

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ABSTRACT

Woman in India is seldom treated at par with man. Even in the twenty first century, she is living a hard life in the male dominated world, in spite of her unparalleled academic excellence and viability. Pilloried, repressed and victimized, she is still fighting for her independence and autonomous existence. The woman of today is no longer an embodiment of excessive endurance and silent suffering in the avowedly post-modernist world. In fact, she has proved the strength of her nerves by creating a niche for herself even in adverse circumstances. Despite all these achievements and efforts, she has to go a long way for their acceptance as equal beings in the prejudiced society. There is a constant struggle between the self and the society. As a result, she lives in a bipolar world: the world of her own dreams and aspirations and the world designed for her by the male-oriented society. Unable to find herself in a position to conform or confront, she faces internal dilemma and the same has been depicted in different shades by Chitra Divakaruni in her short story collection, Arranged Marriage.

KEYWORDS: Conflict, Dilemma, Uncertainty & Internal

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INTRODUCTION

Chitra Divakaruni explores the inner conflict of Indian women subjected to the issues concerned with their postmodern sensibilities and entangled relationship. Presently, Divakaruni lives in the United States, teaches the students, familiar with the western life style but unfolds the multi layers of the problems of those Indian women who are settled in the United States and face the psychological sufferings because of their Indian roots. Her short story collection *Arranged Marriage* unveils the same point of view. The heroine of her first story "The Bats" enters into a loveless marriage and finds a ruthless animal in the form of her husband. She feels suffocated in such an unhealthy environment where every moment of her life is full of agonized experience and silent disapproval. No doubt, she craves for moving out of the subdued world but she is not willing to leave the path of her traditional mindset which pushes her towards passivity and silent submission for her husband. Her sense of dilemma is understood by her small child as she expresses her unexpressed feelings observed by her very minutely: "I gathered my breath for it. But when I saw her eyes, wide like a little girl's as she re read the letter, I realized she hadn't been lying on purpose. She just didn't *know* the way I did" (14). Finding the gloom of uncertainty and darkness around her, she knows no way to go out. As Chris Weedon observes:

The way in which a woman experiences and responds to domestic violence will depend on the ways of understanding it to which she has access. This will involve her self-image and

conceptions of femininity and her beliefs about masculinity and family life. If she sees men as naturally violent or herself as responsible for provoking violence then she is unlikely to see it as an unacceptable exercise of illegitimate power which cannot be tolerated. If she sees masculinity and femininity as natural, fixed and not open to change, then domestic violence will be a personal issue which is not a question of politics at all. (79)

In fact, her whole life turns into a desert where not even a single drop of happiness can be seen up to a long distance. Like her mother, the small girl child, too, finds herself caught in a flux of entangled relationships.

In “Clothes”, the second story in the sequence, Divakaruni describes the picture of a young girl who is going to get marry soon. Like every Indian girl, Sumita, too, has been waiting eagerly for this golden moment of her life. Since her early childhood, the older women of her house like grandmothers and great grandmothers give her preparatory lessons through their stories that one day she has to go to her husband’s home, i.e., her *sasural* and has to spend her life with her husband who will be her companion, protector, caretaker and god. When the time passes and that small soft bud changes into a young and beautiful flower who wants to see her prince but not at the cost of losing her family, she suffers from an internal conflict due to this in between status. Sumita makes a confession to herself regarding this inevitable situation. She further adds:

For the first time it occurred to me that if things worked out the way everyone was hoping, I would be going halfway around the world to live with a man I hadn’t even met. Would I ever see my parents again? *Don’t send me so far away*, I wanted to cry, but of course I didn’t. It would be ungrateful. Father had worked hard to find this match for me. Besides, was not it every woman’s destiny, as Mother was always telling me, to leave the room for the unknown. (18)

Simone de Beauvoir reflects this double-edged image of a young girl in *The Second Sex*, “there is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband-or in some cases a ‘protector’- is for her the most important of undertakings... She will free herself from the parental home, mother’s hold, she will open up her future not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile into the hands of a new master” (352). Neither she neither fully gets detached from her parents and family nor she wants to be used at the hands of her husband. Her position is sandwiched between two different worlds. Being brought up with different attributes and adopting entirely different later on becomes a cause of much frustration and suffering most of the women.

Giving preference to the demands of others in her life, an Indian woman often squeezes her own aspirations and inherent desires. Such is the case with Sumita. The brutal killing of her husband poses a big threat to her urge to do something new. Saddled with sadness, she wants to move forward in her life. But her parents-in-law unconsciously come in her way of self development. They propose her to accompany them by going back to India from the United States. In other words, they want to provide her physical and emotional security as a woman without her husband is considered as a fish out of water. Like the color of her sari, the attitude of the society towards her also gets changed. Torn between her feminist desires on one side and the stereo typed social role on the other, Sumita starts questioning herself:

They are knocking on the door now, calling my name. I push myself off the floor, my body almost too heavy to lift up, as when one climbs out after a long swim. I’m surprised at how vividly it comes to me, this memory I have not called up in years: flailing of arms and legs as I fought my way upward; the press

of the water on me, heavy as terror; the wild animal trapped inside my chest, clawing at my lungs. The day returning to me as searing air, the way I drew it in, in as though I would never have enough of it. (32-33)

This type of internal dilemma sometimes keeps woman in a new spirit. Leaving her past behind, she moves forward in search of self-fulfillment. According to Chris Weedon:

Women's awareness of the conflicts and contradictions in our everyday lives which, from the perspective of an isolated individual, who does not consciously take the social construction of gender into account, may seem inexplicable. Viewed from the perspective of women as a social group, they can produce new ways of seeing which make sense of them, enabling women to call them into question and open the way for change. (5)

Influenced by American culture, most of the Indian women are keenly interested to visit the United States. Some of them wish to pursue their education there, while others have dreamt of getting Indian men settled in the United States as their life-partners. Such ease and readiness can be seen in the character of Jayanti in "Silver Pavements Golden Roofs". She comes to America for higher education having beautiful dreams in her eyes. Here she stays with her aunt and uncle. But soon her sense of enthusiasm is lost as she encounters a group of American youngsters who look down upon her and her aunt because of their Indian flesh and blood. They throw stones on them and speak bad words because of their non-American status. This pathetic and agonizing incident leads her to self-introspection. Ultimately, Jayanti finds herself caught between the wings of imagination and roots of reality:

But I remain in my chair in the corner of the room. I am not sure how to face her either, how to start talking about what has happened. (In my head I am trying to make sense of it still). Am I to ignore it all (can I?)— the hate-suffused faces of the boys, the swelling spreading its dark blotch across Aunt's jaw the memory of uncle's head pressed trembling to her breast? *Home*, I whisper desperately *homehomehome*, and suddenly, intensely, I want my room in Calcutta, where things were so much simpler. (55)

In India, a girl child is nurtured in such a way that she should stick to a strong moral conduct and should never take independent decision regarding her own life and relationships. Sometimes, her inner mind tries to protest against this kind of persecution and wants to live like a free bird that can do whatever she dreams of and loves to do. But the other side of the picture is not pleasant. She is threatened by dire consequences if she dares to cross the ethical and communal boundaries for the attainment of her own blissful self. The heroine of "One Word Love" becomes a helpless victim of such a typical social clime. Brought up in India with Indian values, she loves a young American boy and gets submerged in western concepts and developed a live-in relationship with him. In America, live-in relationship is considered as a personal matter of those who find solace and satisfaction in each other's company. No one else shows any interest in it. But, in India, it is totally unacceptable and immoral in case of a woman particularly. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak" highlights the divided identity of an Indian woman. Doubly disadvantaged in the name of morality, she gets entangled:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subjects-constitution and object-formation the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is displaced figuration of the

“third-world woman” caught between tradition and modernity. (306)

Divided between two opposite cultures and their assumptions, the heroine of “One Word Love” suffers mental agony. Unable to express her inner conflict, she starts questioning herself:

YOU PRACTICE THEM OUT LOUD FOR DAYS IN FRONT OF the bathroom mirror, the words with which you’ll tell your mother you are living with a man. Sometimes they are the words of confession and repentance. Sometimes they are angry, defiant. Sometimes they melt into a single, sighing sound love. You let the water run so he won’t hear you and ask what those foreign phrases you keep saying you mean. You don’t want to have to explain, don’t want another argument like last time. (57)

The female psyche is trapped in the dilemma of having to both internalize and contest such a construction which prescribes fulfillment through denial and protection through exclusion.

Another female character from the next story “A Perfect Life”, Meera is also addicted to American life style in words and deeds. She has a man in her life with which she lives without marriage. She does not listen to other woman’s consistent suggestions about her single status in order to lead a life on her own terms and conditions. But a short sudden appearance of an unknown boy of eleven gives a ‘U’ turn to her simple, carefree and easy going life. She finds him alone on the stairs of her house in a wretched condition. She provides him shelter and fulfils all essential amenities such as food, clothes and other things of children’s interest. Her motherly instincts of love and care mitigate all the past horrible memories from his heart but she cannot keep this boy with her without completing the formalities of legal adoption as it is a punishable act according to the America Law. At this juncture, she makes an attempt to maintain a balance between her position as a woman and her role of a mother:

Trying to get the little child forever Meera loses him. A deep sense of guilt overpowers her. Now she decides to get married just to forget that child. However, she faces internal conflict in her choice for a life partner. Unable to choose between her love, Richard and an Indian man, she talks to herself, “At one point I wrote her a letter saying that I would consider an arranged marriage if she could find me a widower with a little boy of about seven. Such a man, I reasoned, would understand about mother-love for more than Richard or any other American male, for that matter—ever could” (106).

As compared to passive and submissive Indian women, Preeti in “Doors” is conscious of own rights. She prefers western appearance and outlook to traditional way of living and thinking. She does not want to lose her personal space though she finds herself hanging between outer and inner forces. Accepting her husband’s will would diminish her individual identity as she is fed up with Raj’s (her husband’s friend) interference and does not like to see him as part of her house.. At this stage, she faces many upheavals in her life and tries to get over them soon. Her mind is not at peace as she faces a conflict between her duties as a wife to her husband and her commitment to herself. As Helene Cixous aptly puts it:

Now women return from afar, from always; from “without”, from the heath where witches are kept alive, from below, from beyond “culture”... But are they ever seething underneath! What an effort it takes—there’s no end it—for the sex cops to bar their threatening return. Such a display of forces on both sides that the struggle for centuries been immobilized in the trembling equilibrium of a deadlock. (*Medusa* 877)

Preeti’s internal monologue presents a clear picture of her divided psyche:

This can't be happening to me, Preeti told herself as she stared into the bedroom mirror. In the dim light her face looked sallow, unwell. She tried to remember her past successes—standing on a university stage in Ohio receiving her BA degree from the college president, knowing that she was one of a handful of students with solid A's; opening an embossed envelope with trembling fingers to find that she'd been accepted at Berkeley; standing at a podium and hearing the roar of applause when she finished presenting a paper at a national conference. (196)

In professional life, Preeti's hard work pays off and she achieves what she imagines. But in real life, she fails in acquiring a due place for her as it is still under the strict control of her husband. In fact, her faith in herself gets divided between her reasons and emotions and her logic and love.

Chained by her conventional set up, the Indian woman never thinks to give voice to her true feelings. Her suppressed state of desires puts her in a state of confusion. Sometimes, she moves forward to assert her individuality but the next moment she takes a back seat. Torn between her love and her moral obligations, she destroys her peace of mind and considers herself as someone who has committed a big sin. The story of Meena in "Affairs" is dictated on the same lines. She wants to break her unsatisfied relationship in the name of marriage in order to find emotional fulfillment from her American lover, "I think of what my parents will say, and Srikanth's mother, when they find out. *Selfish*, they'll call me. *Immoral*. A bad woman. I have to keep telling myself I'm not that. It's not wrong to want to be happy, is it?" (270). Toril Moi in *Sexual/ Textual Politics* presents the idea of Luce Irigaray about the unpredictable position of woman:

Caught in the specular logic of patriarchy, woman can choose either to remain silent, producing the incomprehensible babble (any utterance that falls outside the logic of the same will by definition be incomprehensible to the male master discourse) or to *enact* the specular representation of herself as a lesser male. (134)

For man, woman is mentioned as someone to satisfy his sexual desires. First, he plays with her, then uses her as a source of recreation and ultimately leaves her in the lurch in order to encounter with the bundle of problems rising from inside and outside. As Sarojini Sahoo writes:

There is a hidden code to exploit women in the whole cultural and social scheme of romantic love, mostly because the concept of romantic love has been authored by men, and is based on men's fractured understanding of women as primarily sexual objects. The patriarchal concept always denies the individuality of a woman as a human being. (137)

Shuffling between the demands of the society and her inner desires, woman does not succeed to cope up with the dark reality of her life. There is a lot of difference between what she really wants and what she actually gets. Asha, in "Meeting Mrinal" epitomizes the woman who suffers emotionally because of her husband's separation from her after a long period of togetherness. She swings between her memorable moments of the past spent with her husband and her recent status when she struggles hardly to move out of this terrible stroke of destiny in her own way. In the moments of despair, she asks herself:

In the mirror my face is blotched my eyes swollen. I stare into them, feeling like a completed failure. I've lost my husband and betrayed my friend, and now to top it all I've vomited all over the sink in my son's presence. I think of how hard I always tried to be the perfect wife and mother like the heroines

of mythology— I grew up on patient, faithful Sita, selfless Kunti. For the first time it strikes me that perhaps Mahesh had a similar image in his head. Perhaps he fled from us because he wanted a last chance to be the virile Arjun, the mighty Bhim. (298)

The internal chaos of thoughts in her mind takes a violent turn and makes her depressed and disillusioned. Life becomes dull and boring as there is no color in it. Legal separation from her husband turns out to be a traumatic experience as she feels psychologically disturbed between her inner fears of the society. “Force, whether overt or covert, used to wrest from the individual (woman) something that she does not want to give of her own free will and which causes her either physical injury or emotional trauma or both” (Hatimi 195).

In contrast to Asha, her childhood friend Mrinal leads a lonely life as she is still single. She has every worldly thing in her life except a companion and a loving family. Meeting Mrinal after a long span of twenty years, Asha gets the impression from her outer appearance that she is enjoying a luxurious and contented life only due to her unmarried status and she does not have worries as there are no such issues of conflict in her life which come with husband, household and children. At first, Mrinal gives a positive response when she says: “You’re right. There’s a lot in my life that I’m proud of. The freedom. The power. Walking into a room full of men knowing none of them can push me around. Seeing the reluctant admiration in their eyes when I close a tough deal” (294). But reality is entirely different. The tears behind her exotic image reveal another story. She is alone as there is no one in her life with whom she can share her feelings. “I know’. Mrinal sighed too ‘some mornings when I wake up I don’t want to open my eyes. I know how everything will be— the color-coordinated bedspread and carpet and curtains and cushions...’ ” (295).

Viewing Mrinal and Asha it may be noted that both suffer acutely in the general drama of pain as they are forced to play the roles against their desires. Both are in search of their own real identity fighting against the disturbances caused by matrimonial alliances and loneliness due to being unmarried respectively. Both make powerful attempts to cope up with the emotional conflict that generates a negative stance in them. Asha is stuck between two different worlds—one is the world of her husband and loving son and the other is of bitter loneliness where no one is around her to give her a hand of love and support. On the other hand, Mrinal, to As Malti Agarwal, is struggling with her own sense of alienation.

Luce Irigaray’s comment is significant in this context, “of course, we were allowed--we hold to?--display one truth even as we sensed but muffled stifled another. Truth’s other side—its complement? It’s remainder? — stayed hidden. Secret” (“Lips 73”).

Biologically as well as socially, woman in India is exploited from the day of her birth till her demise. Even the womb of her mother is not a safe place for her. She takes birth for a man, suffers at his hands and makes sacrifices to make him happy and satisfied. Frankly speaking, her own self finally awakes and comes forward to conflict with oppressive nature of patriarchy. Her contradictory position in society is well expressed by Shailaja B. Wadikar, “Women have been standing at the crossroads of history for centuries with tears in their eyes and milk in their breasts. Ours is a man centred world” (121). The repressed state of woman in India can be defined in terms of Foucault’s oppression scheme:

Thus we have two schemes for the analysis of power. The contract-oppression schema, which is the juridical one, and the domination-repression or war-repression schema for which the pertinent opposition is not between the legitimate and illegitimate, as in the first schema, but between struggle and submission. (92)

The story of "The Ultrasound" brings into focus the dilemma in which Runu and her best friend Anju are caught and desperately try to fill the gap between idealism and reality. The tension in their lives is reflected through their touching communication which lays bare the inhuman and merciless attitude of narrow minded Indian society towards women. "The Ultrasound' is a piece of fiction which reflects real life and it portrays a typical Indian middle class attitude towards female foetus: that is aborting them" (Nubile 18). Runu, a well-educated, but passive young woman wants to give birth to her girl child but her family puts immense pressure on her to abort that child as all of them are having only one desire, i.e., the birth of a male child. At this stage, Runu is torn between her love for her unborn child and her wicked husband's lust for a baby boy. Unable to take a firm decision, she calls her friend Anju and seeks her advice in such a tough situation, "I wept and begged. I even threatened suicide but they're adamant... Anju'. Runu calls desperately, 'what am I going to do?' " (224). Living in America with her husband Sunil, Anju, too is pregnant. At first, she advises Runu to leave her husband's house for the well being of her unborn child, but she feels herself in a flux when she considers her husband's point of view regarding Runu and her baby's future:

I open my mouth to protest hotly, then shut it. I'm remembering the pictures we used to draw when we were little, Runu and I, about what we wanted to be when we grew up. Mine would change from week to week—a jungle explorer, a scientist, a parachute jumper—but hers were the same. They showed a stick-figure woman in a traditional red bordered sari with a big bunch of keys tied to the *palloo*... Had I taken all of that away from her by my misplaced American notions of feminism and justice? For a moment a terrible doubt rises in me like nausea, threatening to spill out. (227)

This type of contradiction in a woman's life results in a sense of dissatisfaction and further leads to her eccentric behavior in her routine existence.

This type of conflict can be seen in "The Maid Servant's Story" where a young unmarried girl finds herself trapped between tradition bound self and rebelliousness. She stays in her sister's house as she is pregnant and needs her support. In her sister's absence, she finds the sister's gentle husband trying to molest his own maid servant. The poor maid Sarala resists him in different ways but he blindly wants to gratify his sexual drives. The young girl is shocked to see the real dangerous face of her brother-in-law and wishes to get it exposed at any cost. But the next moment, she takes her steps in a backward direction thinking about her sister's life which is going to be ruined by her courageous act, "Should she indicate to her that she knew what had happened and try, together, to figure out a plan so that it did not occur again? Should she approach her brother-in-law with her dangerous knowledge and blackmail him into good behavior? Should she tell her sister?" (146). Like every Indian girl, she, too, is nurtured in a way that she lacks confidence in taking an important decision independently. "Youngest in the household and a girl besides, she'd always had people making decision for her, or at least telling her what to do, praising her for being tractable and obedient, which as everyone knew were the cardinal virtues of womanhood " (147)

CONCLUSIONS

The female characters portrayed by Chitra Divakaruni in *Arranged Marriage* are having divided selves. Living in the United States, they are not able to discard their feminine Indian roots. As a result, most of them face internal dilemma and get confused. "Despite the drawback of maligning the cultural practices of India, the short stories of Divakaruni touch

the mind and soul of the reader by exploring the facets of gendered issues and marital relationships in the diasporic space. These stories are a powerful portrayal of the heartthrobs of women caught in crossroads" (Divi 248).

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